

Resurrecting a vision

In The Prophet, Brett Bailey boldly takes on one of the most enigmatic figures in Xhosa history, writes John Matshikiza

Six weeks before the play was due to premier at Grahamstown, Brett Bailey had his laptop computer stolen from his makeshift office in Port St Johns, where he was rehearsing with his group, Third World Bunfight. Lost with the precious hard drive was the developing script of his play *The Prophet* — potentially a disaster for most playwrights.

Bailey was momentarily nonplussed, but it would take more than a technological mishap to put him off track. The show goes on.

Bailey's plays so far have all developed from the germ of an idea in his brain, which is then developed with the group. Nothing is cast in stone, it seems, until the last moment, and even then the ideas continue to grow.

In this case, he started writing the script in August last year, then worked with the core group and others in Zimbabwe and the Eastern Cape, to focus on various themes and musical styles that would blend into his brand of ritual and theatre.

At a later stage more fresh blood would be brought into the mix — a contingent of schoolchildren and a traditional Xhosa singing group. Bailey got his long-time collaborator

Saskia Hegt, a New York and Amsterdam-based teacher and director, to join him on the creative team. By the end of the process, there was probably enough brainpower and collective memory around to turn the loss of a mere computer into a hitch, rather than a crisis.

Collective perception is the coin Bailey likes to deal in. *Ipi Zombi*, Bailey's 1998 offering at Grahamstown, was based on a true story of collective hysteria that turned into a lethal witch hunt near Kokstad. *iMumbo Jumbo*, Bailey's previous festival blockbuster, was based on the exploits of trickster Nicholas Gcaleka who took the whole country on a roller-coaster ride to Scotland in search of the head of king Hintsa.

This time round it is the legend of the prophetess Nongqawuse — a tale that is bound to be a tormented presence in the collective memory of South Africa for generations to come.

"What really fascinates me," says Bailey, "is the mesmerisation, the fact that so many of the

Xhosa were mesmerised by the visions and prophecies of a small girl."

It is a painful wound to reopen among Xhosa people, and probably for the greater black population, too. Nongqawuse's is the ultimate tale of African self-delusion in the face of European colonial aggression.

Through her visions, the lonely and unremarkable 15-year-old girl persuaded the Xhosa nation in the mid-19th century that their

salvation lay in the mass sacrifice of their cattle and crops. As a result, more than 100 000 people died of starvation, and the victory the British army could not achieve by military assault was achieved by other means.

This led to speculation that the British themselves were responsible for laying the seeds of this cataclysmic prophecy in Nongqawuse's mind — a

belief still firmly held by many people in the Eastern Cape. The question has never been resolved. Nongqawuse herself has always remained an enigmatic figure in Xhosa history.

Bailey stresses that rather than opening an old wound, his interest is in helping to heal it. He believes that his style of ritualistic theatre, where the performers themselves achieve something of a state of mesmerisation, and the audi-

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ence is drawn in as an active participant, complete with the aura of incense and medicinal herbs, is part of this healing process.

Bailey is not interested in demonising Nongqawuse more than she has already been. He cites a play written by HIE Dhlomo in the 1930s (one of many previous attempts to dramatise the saga of Nongqawuse) where the author, himself a black man, ironically portrays Nongqawuse as a godsend because her folly, and the destruction that followed it, led to the black race abandoning their belief in the supernatural.

In the Dhlomo play, the real heroes were the white missionaries who brought the word of reason to the benighted heathen. Such a perception would receive a poor response in today's world.

Bailey confesses to have been initially daunted at taking on this story, with its potential for inflaming raw sensibilities. Now, he says, having spent so long working his way around the story, he wonders what the controversy is about. It is no more nor less than a simple human story, like all his other stories, whose consequences were far bigger than anyone could have foreseen.

The important thing will be not so much the nature of Nongqawuse's elusive character, but the reverberations of her actions on the people she lived among, and their descendants.

To PAGE 2

Resurrecting a vision

From PAGE 1

For example, how were the families of the cast members involved in this drama 150 years ago? What happened to them? The absence of this knowledge is part of the exploration of the piece.

Bailey describes his work method as being about "giving a slant on reality, not about reflecting the whole of reality". He brings to his exploration of these themes his own training as an anthropologist, counterpointed with his own mystical experiences.

After graduating from the University of Cape Town, Bailey travelled extensively around India and was absorbed by that huge country's mysticism. Then he returned to Southern Africa and felt he had to get in touch with the spiritual heart of his own country.

Hitchhiking alone through Zimbabwe

we in 1992, he "had a very powerful and extraordinary vision whilst spending the night in a remote ravine. This changed my life dramatically and put me on the course of working with theatre to nurture the embattled Spirit of Africa."

He brings the tensions of these "rational" and "mythical" sides of himself to his work with these daunting tales from the African soul.

Bailey promises that in terms of staging and casting the audience of *The Prophet* "is in for some big surprises". One of these is probably the use of his constant collaborator, the diminutive Abey Yakwe, as Nongqawuse.

This year Third World Bunfight will be housed at the Power Station. Audiences will be transported to this out-of-the-way spot on a vehicle called "the Cattle Truck". Watch out for a wild ride.